

# empire

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Harriet Tubman **PAGES 5-9**

AUBURN

# Art takes on political undertones in summer exhibit



**‘Excellence in Fibers VII’ pieces address voting rights, the U.S. Supreme Court and dictatorships**

## Schweinfurth Art Center

“Truth to Power,” fiber artist Adrienne Sloane’s piece in the Schweinfurth Art Center’s latest exhibit, compels viewers to stop and examine it.

Hanging from the ceiling are several supine male and female figures, with blood-red crocheted wire forms falling down into a circle underneath. The figures move with the slight breeze as visitors pass it, adding to its impact. There’s no mistaking the strong anti-war message that Sloane’s work invokes – her goal in creating it.

The piece is one of several in the exhibit “Excellence in Fibers VII,” on display at the Schweinfurth through Aug. 14, that highlight political topics, including voting rights, the U.S. Supreme Court, and dictatorships. The exhibit was curated by Fiber Art Now, a national fiber art magazine, and includes international artists.

“Many of the pieces in ‘Excellence in Fibers’ have political undertones,” said Schweinfurth Program Director Davana Robedee. “The artists are reacting to their surroundings, to the world around them, most with nontraditional fiber materials.”

For some, the message is a result of intent, such as Sloane’s piece. For others, their work is a reaction to information they recently learned.

**SEE FIBER, T6**

**A childhood upbringing in Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship can be seen in Paulina Fuenzalida-Guzman’s installation, “Glint” in the “Excellence in Fibers VII” exhibition at the Schweinfurth Art Center. The piece features five ghostly figures hanging from the ceiling.**

*Schweinfurth Art Center*

**Also at the Schweinfurth:  
Syracuse artist  
Vanessa Johnson  
honors Harriet Tubman**

## Schweinfurth Art Center

Syracuse artist Vanessa Johnson has always considered Underground Railroad conductor and activist Harriet Tubman an iconic, legendary hero. When Johnson began her career as a storyteller, she avoided telling Tubman’s stories because she felt she could not do Tubman justice.

“It is only in the last couple of years, as I have become more grounded in my abilities as a storyteller, that I have included more and more stories about her life in my performances,” Johnson said.

The same is true of her art. Johnson’s exhibition “In God’s Voice: A Celebration  
**SEE TUBMAN, T8**



## FIBER

Continues from T5

## POLITICAL ACTIVIST, TOO

The biography on Sloane's website describes her as "a contemporary fiber artist with a political focus." One could also say political activist. In addition to making art about political issues, she conducted several postcard campaigns in which she gave postcards with her artwork to anyone who would use it to lobby their Congress members.

"By visually addressing the frayed and unraveled places around me, I hope to promote thoughtful dialogue about critical questions as we navigate the difficult times we live in," said Sloane, of Lexington, Massachusetts.

In fact, "Truth to Power" was created in response to feedback about an earlier piece she made, "Cost of War." That artwork, which was displayed at Fiberart International in 2007, portrayed only men as casualties of war.

Artist Gray Caskey of Portland, Oregon, made her piece, "Dissenting," as a memorial to Ruth Bader Ginsburg "as well as a recognition of my own loss of hope in her passing." The work was completed around the same time that Ginsburg died, and it draws its title from the Supreme Court justice's collars that she wore over her robes when she disagreed with the majority's opinion.

"Upon knowing this is a tribute to Ruth Bader Ginsburg, I hope the viewer feels a sense of reverence," Caskey said. "While they may not be able to feel the physical weight of the piece, I hope they are able to imagine and empathize with the load that fell on Ginsburg's shoulders for so many years."

She said that she doesn't typically make political statements in her work, but that seems to be changing. "I now have additional pieces in progress that speak to our current political climate," she said. "I'm not sure if this is a new direction for my work or just a reflection of these unprecedented times. This is just my current process of trying to make something beautiful despite everything falling apart around us."

## ART WITH SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Recently acquired knowledge led Katherine McClelland, of West Springfield, Massachusetts, to create "Stacey Abrams," a felt portrait of the Georgia politician, author and voting rights activist. McClelland became aware of Abrams in 2018 when she lost her race for Georgia's governorship.

"My goal for this piece was to honor Ms. Abrams and her work to ensure voting rights, McClelland said. "Beyond my admiration of Ms. Abrams, my motivation for this piece was influenced by the fact that we, as a country, have a long way to go to ensure all voices are heard. Until we have accurate representation, we will not see true equity in our communities."

She said her work often challenges accepted norms, and art is her way to have an impact on the world. "Creating textile art with a social commentary feels appropriate and in line with a long tradition of women makers who used this discipline to have a voice in a world that would prefer their silence," McClelland said.

Sometimes the political message sneaks out even when the artist doesn't intend it. Paulina Fuenzalida-Guzman, a native of Chile who now lives in Acushnet, Massachusetts, created "Glint," featuring five ghostly figures hanging from the ceiling.

Two sets look at each other with unemotional faces, while the last stares off in a different direction.



West Springfield, Massachusetts, artist Katherine McClelland has taken a keen interest in the voting rights work of Stacey Abrams following her unsuccessful run for governor of Georgia. McClelland felted her work, "Stacey Abrams," as a reminder that we need to work to ensure everyone can vote. Katherine McClelland via Schweinfurth Art Center





Visitors examine pieces in “Excellence in Fibers VII,” an exhibit of fiber arts pieces on display at the Schweinfurth Art Center. The exhibit was organized by national magazine Fiber Art Now and includes artists from around the world. *Schweinfurth Art Center*

Fuenzalida-Guzman intended the piece to show glances and ways of seeing the world. However, her experience growing up under the Pinochet dictatorship pervades her art, even subconsciously. “The dictatorship committed many injustices and human rights violations, and the violence inflicted on my compatriots for dissenting disturbed me,” she said.

“Glint” connects both. “Some of the figures connect their gazes, producing a glint,” Fuenzalida-Guzman said. “That attitude of closeness speaks of empathy, something that we lost during the Pinochet dictatorship and caused us a lot of sorrow. On the other hand, another figure looking in the opposite direction symbolizes a different way of thinking that we must also respect. I do not want intolerance to be repeated in my country or anywhere else.”



Artist Gray Caskey, of Portland, Oregon, made this work, “Dissenting,” in honor of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The piece, part of “Excellence in Fibers VII” at the art center, was finished about the same time that Ginsburg died.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** “Excellence in Fibers VII,” an international exhibit of fiber art curated by Fiber Art Now that includes wall/floor works, sculptures, wearable pieces and more.

**Where:** Schweinfurth Art Center, 205 Geneesee St., Auburn.

**Dates:** Now through Aug. 14.

**Hours:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays.

**Cost:** Schweinfurth’s three exhibits, general admission, \$10; members, participating artists and children 12 and under, free. The Schweinfurth and Cayuga Museum are selling a \$15 admission that includes both locations.



## TUBMAN



According to Syracuse artist Vanessa Johnson, “The 7 Pillars of Faith” are Mystery, Incarnation, Vindication, Revelation, Proclamation, Believe and Glorification — all represented by women. “I think of (Harriet) Tubman as a house of wisdom, a house of mystery, listening to the voice of God during her blackouts,” Johnson said. *Schweinfurth Art Center*

## Continues from T5

of the Spirituality of Harriet Tubman” includes her first visual artworks honoring Tubman. The exhibit is on display at the Schweinfurth Art Center and the Cayuga Museum of History & Art in Auburn through mid-August as part of the Emerging Artists Project.

Yet as Johnson worked on those pieces, she heard a small voice ask, “Who are you to think that you can speak for her?”

## A CNY NATIVE

Johnson is a multidisciplinary artist who has been following in Tubman’s social justice footprints since she was a student at the University of Houston, majoring in political science and becoming president of the Black Student Union. “I had no interest in the arts during college,” she said. “I was an activist!”

A Syracuse native, Johnson grew up on the South Side until the beginning of fourth grade, when her family moved to Camillus.

She was interested in music, taking piano lessons from ages 5 to 12, folk guitar in middle school, flute from fourth through 12th grades and piccolo in high school. After college, she sang with a Houston all-Black choir and orchestra, performing classical music written by Black composers, including Nathaniel Dett.

Early in the 1990s, Johnson began writing plays and short stories. She then started creating quilts and mixed media fiber artwork in the middle of the decade and began performing stories in the late 1990s.

Her social justice work took a different form in 2010 when she began consulting with the newly opened Matilda Joselyn Gage Foundation Center in Fayetteville. The center is dedicated to educating people about Gage’s work and its power to inspire contemporary social change.

“I designed the Underground Railroad Room and took part in planning how the



In “Glory,” artist Vanessa Johnson discusses Harriet Tubman as a key part of the Black Lives Matter movement of the 1800s: the Abolitionist movement. *Schweinfurth Art Center*



Johnson speaks to a visitor during the May 28 opening of her exhibit, “In God’s Voice: A Celebration of the Spirituality of Harriet Tubman,” at the Schweinfurth Art Center. Her exhibit spans two institutions, the Schweinfurth and the Cayuga Museum of History & Art, both in Auburn. *Provided*

## IF YOU GO

**What:** “In God’s Voice: A Celebration of the Spirituality of Harriet Tubman,” by Vanessa Johnson.

**Where:** Schweinfurth Art Center and Cayuga Museum of History & Art, 205 and 203 Genesee St., Auburn.

**Dates:** Now through Aug. 14 at the Schweinfurth and through Aug. 13 at the Cayuga Museum.

**Artist talk:** Johnson will give an artist talk about her work at 5:30 p.m. Aug. 5 at the Schweinfurth as part of First Friday festivities. The event is free and open to the public.

**Hours:** Schweinfurth is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays. Cayuga Museum is open 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays.

**Cost:** General admission, \$10 for just the Schweinfurth or \$15 to view all exhibits in both locations. Members, participating artists and children 12 and under get in for free.



**Griot Vanessa Johnson, of Syracuse, practices the art of storytelling. A griot is a traditional West African storyteller who is responsible for accurately reciting historical events through song, speech, reenactment, screenwriting and musical composition which effect society or a specific community.** *Jonathan T. Spencer*

room presents the history of the Underground Railroad and human trafficking to our audience,” Johnson said. “I continue to consult on the interpretation of that room.”

In 2012, she was involved in the pilot Girl Ambassadors for Human Rights Program, which the Gage Foundation continued the following year. Johnson was director of the program from 2016 to 2021, when she became artist in residence at the Gage center.

## ACTIVISM THROUGH ART

Her dedication to activism can be seen in her work. The artist’s statement for “Glory,” one of her artworks at the Schweinfurth, reads: “Black lives mattered to Harriet Tubman. She was a soldier for freedom, a holy and righteous presence in the Black Lives Matter movement of the 1800s: the Abolitionist Movement.”

Johnson’s statement for another piece, “Lead Me to the Promised Land,” lashes out at those who seek to bury their ancestors’ role in Black enslavement:

“they turn the cries of history into silenced whispers  
closed within banned books  
so as not to offend the children of a monstrous American  
past. present. future.”

Many of her works are autobiographical visual stories, including “The Grandmothers,” a set of two tall, thin chains of fiber pieces festooned with masks, wood and found objects. Johnson’s statement tells the story of how she discovered her African heritage after she had her DNA tested by the Howard University Genome Project, and how she insisted on opening the letter while on the phone with her mother as they both learned the home county of their mother’s mother.

“The central theme to the majority of my work addresses women’s lives and our hopes, dreams, triumph, and challenges,” Johnson said. “My art also addresses the issues in the lives of African-Americans and American racism, and my relationship with my African heritage.”

In her latest body of work, most of which was made between February and May this year, she examines Tubman’s spirituality through the lens of an African perspective.

“Her spiritual connection encompasses the African American community during her lifetime, in the present, and eternally,” Johnson explained. “I chose to examine her life in this way because of my own belief in the transformative power that an awareness of our Ancestors holds in all of our lives.

“She is an honored Ancestor in my life.”